

Massachusetts Department of Public Health

Public Health Advisory

Risks of obtaining prescription drugs without proper medical care

Under Massachusetts law, licensed pharmacies are the only stores that may sell prescription medications; and licensed pharmacies may sell these medications only to customers who present a prescription from a licensed health care provider. These laws are designed to protect your health and safety and that of your family.

If you buy a prescription drug without having had proper medical care or a proper prescription from a health care provider, there are risks to your health.

Risks of treating yourself with a prescription drug

Undertreatment of your condition so that you don't get enough medication to make you well

Inappropriate treatment caused by your not getting the right drug for your condition

Unsafe treatment that may cause damage to your body or health

Drug interactions resulting from dangerous mixing with other drugs you are taking

Allergic interactions that could be harmful if you have any drug allergies

Medical complications or effects of the drug that could actually worsen your health

Bacteria resistant to antibiotics could cause the infection to continue

Unexpected adverse reactions or bad effects that could cause illness, injury or even death

If you buy a prescription drug from an unlicensed source (e.g., store, market, bodega) rather than from a pharmacy, there are risks to your safety and health.

Risks of illegally sold prescription drugs

Unapproved drugs that have not been shown to be either safe or effective

Untested and unsafe drugs that may contain dangerous substances

Counterfeit drugs that do not contain the drug you believed you were buying

Outdated drugs that are beyond the expiration date and may have lessened effectiveness

Banned drugs that have been shown to cause illness, injury or death

Animal drugs sold for human use but are not safe for human use

Contaminated drugs that contain dangerous materials or substances

Drugs with little or no active ingredient that will not work

Mislabeled drugs that have incorrect ingredients or dosages

An example: Treating yourself with antibiotics

If you have a sore throat and treat yourself with an antibiotic for a few days, the symptoms may go away and you may feel better but the infection could still be active in your body. You could have a serious infection such as strep throat. Because you are not being treated by a health care provider, you may not be getting the right treatment, the right antibiotic or the right amount of antibiotic. As a result, you could experience *medical complications*, the most serious of which is rheumatic fever, which can cause heart disease. At the same time, your family and others are exposed to the infection.

Another problem: Bacterial resistance to antibiotics

Treating yourself with antibiotics can be harmful in another way. Repeated and improper uses of antibiotics are primary causes of the increase in drug resistant bacteria, one of the world's most pressing health problems. Every year antibiotics become less effective against bacteria and infections are harder to cure.

The example above is what can happen when taking antibiotics without proper medical care. Different complications and ill health effects can occur with other medications when you treat yourself.

If you feel you need treatment for a medical condition, we encourage you to speak with a health care provider. If you have any questions about prescription drugs or this advisory, please call the Department of Public Health, Center for Quality Assurance and Control, at 1-800-462-5540. If you speak a language other than English, you can still call this number. An interpreter will be available.

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